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## THE OLD HOUSE AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

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The subject of this paper is an invocation to the muse of eloquence. "About the old house clusters tender memories and dear associations," or again, "Home life in America is lacking in flavor because our houses are too new and without setting." Here the muse departs for she learns that we are not interested in the old house from the standpoint of its years, but that for the purpose of this paper we are classing some houses of less than twenty-five years as old and some of more than fifty years as new. As a matter of fact, the mere passage of time has as little to do in determining the age of a house as it does in determining the age of an individual. Much more depends upon the material with which the years have to work and upon environment. The two types of old houses that we are interested in are, first, the small, poorly designed and cheaply constructed house that later becomes a miserable shack, and second, the large substantially built house that has outlived its usefulness as the residence of its owner and is transformed into a makeshift tenement.

Every city has its heritage of miserable, dilapidated shacks that were built in violation of every code of beauty, safety, sanitation and comfort, or have long outlived the code under which they were built. Fifty years ago, when most of our cities were only growing towns, these houses with cisterns, stables and earth closets in the yard were comparatively harmless because the yards were not crowded with other houses, and so they had an opportunity for light, fresh air and cleanliness that distance affords, but as the city has grown, as other houses have been built upon the lots, and as no repairs or improvements have been made, these houses have deteriorated into wretched hovels where human derelicts congregate and breed disease and vice. Not remotely removed from the heart of "one of our large and beautiful cities" there was until yesterday such an infected area where forty of these shacks, built by squatters

a generation or so ago, huddled together on a hillside property owned by a railroad. As more of these shacks were built year by year, the yards became so crowded that the refuse of the earth closets stained and dampened the walls and floors of the lower tier of houses, and the ditches that formerly carried away surface drainage became open sewers, and the cisterns, getting not only the water from begrimed roofs but the seepage from filthy yards, became germ-breeding holes. In one of these houses lived a woman who, with the aid of charity that was not charity, was supporting, by washing, a syphilitic husband, a tubercular sister and five children, four of whom were physically and mentally defective. Who can reckon the number of people who were exposed to the dangers of disease that emanated from this one old house? Yet the railroad company hesitated to order these shacks removed because many of their occupants had been in its employ or were the mothers or widows of those who had been in its employ. To say that the company felt that it was doing these people a kindness to let them live under such conditions might be overstating the case, but at least it felt that it would be doing them an unkindness to order them to vacate and to remove the shacks.

The other type of old house that we are interested in is the old building remodeled into the makeshift tenement. It represents the architectural splendors of comfortable living of a few generations ago, and because of its durability, it has survived in a neighborhood where all else has changed. It represents decadent respectability and stands as a monument to the ruthless waste and needless sacrifice of an evershifting population because our cities have been allowed to grow without plan or reason. By adding storerooms on the front, by joining other old houses on the rear, by subdividing rooms with thin board partitions, thus creating unventilated, inside rooms, these houses have been changed into flimsy tenements that are worse than the dumb-bell and railroad types of tenements of New York City. The apartments thus made are without privacy, without fire prevention, without plumbing and generally, without a possibility of real homemaking. I know of several such tenements where it is necessary to go through one suite to get to another, and I know of one such tenement where it is necessary to go over a roof of one apartment to get to another. Practically all of these tenements have insufficient water supplies and toilet facilities. In many cases what was once the bathroom of a one-family house now serves as a public toilet

for two to eight families. When a tenement house inspector ordered an owner of one such a place to make some necessary improvements, he, who by the way was on the city's payroll, replied, "What was good enough for me to be born in is good enough for that bunch of foreigners to live in," and this notwithstanding the fact that he was born there over fifty years ago and was a member of one family and today there are four families occupying the house with little or no repairs in twenty years.

In this day when we are learning that public health is a public asset and that it is a purchasable commodity, let us inquire what the effect of the old house is upon the health of its occupants. That these miserable dwellings that violate every sanitary law afford an excellent environment for the development and spread of the germs of a number of diseases is self-evident. We all know that tuberculosis flourishes best in dark and damp rooms, that the typhoid bacillus is conveyed through a polluted food supply and venereal disease is spread by overcrowding. Sanitary surveys everywhere are telling the close relationship between disease and old, insanitary dwellings. Recently a study of two contrasting districts was made in Cleveland, and one of the results was the showing in actual figures of the relation of disease and death to the insanitary dwellings. One district is in the old crowded business section of the city, where the population houses itself in abominable, makeshift tenements and dilapidated, filthy houses that are never repaired or cleaned up because the owners expect soon to sell the property for business purposes. The other district, which was chosen for the purpose of contrast, is in the outlying section of the city near some manufacturing plants, and is made up mostly of comparatively new houses, many of which are being purchased by the tenants, and practically all of which are maintained in a sanitary, even attractive condition, though the rents are no higher than they are for the houses in insanitary condition. In the first district there were 908 cases of tuberculosis since 1907 or 52 per 1,000. In the second district there were 450 or 28 per 1,000. In the first district there were 665 cases of contagious disease in 1912 or 3 per 1,000. In the second district there were 286 cases of contagious disease or 18 per 1,000. Other cities are finding out the same facts. The welfare commission of Kansas City found that infant mortality was from five to seven times as bad in districts where the disgraceful shacks and hovels which have defaced

the city for so long exist than in any other part of the city. In a study of fifty backward children from a Chicago public school, it was found out that forty-three were physically defective, and every one of these forty-three children came from houses that were so sordid and insanitary that they were unworthy to be called homes. A report from Glasgow shows that children that come from homes of one or two rooms are smaller and lighter in weight than those brought up in larger and less crowded and better lighted rooms. However, to discuss from a statistical or scientific standpoint, a fact so obvious as the effects of the filthy, dilapidated, overcrowded house upon the health of its occupants, is as futile as it is unnecessary. Just as we have passed a day when a health officer can say, "It was the will of God to visit the community with an epidemic of typhoid," so we have passed the day when we need be told that dark, damp, unventilated rooms, foul plumbing, vault closets and filthy yards and stables breed germs faster than all the doctors in the land can cure the resulting diseases.

The effects of the old house upon the moral and social life of a community are almost as obvious as they are upon health. Contrast the sanitary maps of any city that show where its neglected dwellings are, with those that show where its juvenile delinquents, its wayward girls, its insane mothers, and deserting fathers, its drunkards and drug habitues, and its criminals come from, and you will find that they indicate the same areas. We must accept as a matter of course that the child reared in these unhealthy and unattractive homes where there is not an opportunity for normal and wholesome living and natural development, will be either morally or physically defective or both. A probation officer visited one of these old houses on the rear of a lot to confer with the mother of a young girl who had been arrested for soliciting on the streets. He found the mother and three younger children tying willow plumes in a small, ill-smelling room. After listening indifferently to her visitors for a while, the mother smiled pityingly and said, "Do you think that I don't know what my daughter is doing and do you think I am not glad to have her escape this in any way she can?" and she waved her hand about the room. Only such travesties of home as this could make such a travesty of motherhood. It is not to be wondered that mothers of such homes go insane, that husbands desert and children fill our reformatories. The child to whom the word home recalls

only the unattractive, crowded rooms in a miserable building that looks like all of the other miserable buildings of the street, from which he gladly escapes to find his pleasures in the street or public places, is very apt to end his career where he began it—rearing more unfortunates to a life that he himself could not escape. Visiting nurses, associated charities agents, probation officers and settlement workers may expend their time and resources in these districts, but they can do little more than alleviate the misery of today that will in some hideous form manifest itself tomorrow, so long as human beings are left to live under conditions that breed not only disease and death, but under conditions that are so sordid and so miserable that happiness and beauty and comfort can never be known, and in their places grow sodden indifference, blind despair and viciousness.

There are those that argue that the miserable conditions that we find in these old houses do not make these people, but that they, because they are subnormal, will inevitably fall down the social ladder to the pit at its bottom. But why have the pit? Why not let the social waste go to the institutions that are designed to care for it, and so remove the possibility of its breeding more of its kind and spreading its infections throughout the community? Then there are others who argue that these old houses are necessary to accommodate the poor who cannot afford better living conditions. In Cleveland a year ago, twenty families living in miserable shacks were ordered to vacate as the shacks had been declared unfit for human habitation by the local board of health. All of these families claimed that they could not afford better quarters and declared that if their houses, for which they paid little or no rent, were destroyed they could not exist. Before they were finally ejected from these houses, the associated charities was interviewed and agreed to assist them to pay their rent in better quarters in an effort to rehabilitate them. The year has passed and not one of the families has applied to the associated charities for aid and every family has moved into better houses—as they had to do because they were living in the worst hovels that the city possessed—and every family is paying more than twice the rent it had paid except one, which built a new and comfortable home. In this change several families cast off some unnecessary impedimenta, such as an insane grandfather of eighty years whom one family had refused to commit to an asylum; a tubercular friend who was sent to a sanitarium and two defective children who

were sent to an orphan asylum and one drunken husband who was forced to make a longer sojourn at the workhouse than he had done before. Many neighborhoods, like many closets, are the better off for such a clearing out and no doubt a family that has lost such a charge as some of these that had dragged it down for years, can the more readily rehabilitate itself. Former Ambassador Bryce summed up this phase of the social problem of bad housing in the sentence, "Cleanliness, health, self-respect, manners and morals, are all immensely depressed by sordid conditions, and correspondingly raised when the environment is improved."

Most of our cities, due to their rapid growth, have districts that are going through a transition from resident districts to factory and business districts. Rent from dwellings is decreasing, while land value is greatly increasing. The owners of many of these houses, foreseeing the opportunity to sell the land for business purposes in one year or ten years, will not repair or improve their houses, because they argue it would be a waste to put more money in the houses that will in themselves bring no return when selling the land. They tell you in complacent tones that imply that they think themselves philanthropists that they are asking little or no rent, just enough to pay the taxes. They fail to realize that the taxes could be paid and never missed from the unearned increment. You suggest that if they are not willing to repair these houses, that they vacate them and hold them vacant, and they are indignant that you should be so impractical as to ask them to pay taxes on property that is bringing them in no income. Yet, this same property that they paid \$3,000 for twenty years ago, they will sell for \$30,000, and in the meantime they have enjoyed a fair interest on the original investment through rent. And notwithstanding the fact that the owner is getting in rent returns only enough to meet the taxes, he has gradually increased the rent without giving to the tenant any advantages in return, for as land values have increased, the taxes have increased, and so he has correspondingly increased the rent.

In addition to this obvious injustice to the renter, is the injustice to other property owners. This injustice is manifested, first, in the failure to force owners of this type of property to comply with the existing laws. For example, in one of our growing and therefore typical cities, a railroad company proposed a high-level bridge, a contemplated interurban station as well as a long-hoped-for union

depot. The railroad company has been figuring on purchasing certain properties for five or more years, and it is supposed by hopeful property owners in these regions that the company will purchase certain other properties. In the estimation of the courts of that city, it is unreasonable or unjust for the building or sanitary departments to enforce their regulations on houses in those districts, because these houses are soon to be sold and torn down, and the court does not think that those houses should in the meantime be held vacant. One of the many results of this opinion is that fourteen families have been permitted to use and continue to be permitted to use one foul yard closet, while the owner continues to get a good rent from his houses and holds the land at three times its original value. Can the sanitary department of that city consistently require other property owners to provide one sanitary toilet for every two families as the law states? The second injustice against property owners lies in the fact that new houses have to enter into rent competition with these houses. Thus the entire housing problem of the city is complicated because real estate dealers cannot be expected to build a new and sanitary house that must enter into rent competition with these places, that are allowed to deteriorate from year to year until they all but fall upon the heads of the tenants, for the rents from the new houses must be sufficient to keep up repairs and bring a fair return on the money invested. Therefore it would be exceedingly difficult for them to compete with these houses that receive no repairs and pay no return on the investment, as that is more than covered in the increase in land value.

These old houses not only prevent new houses from being built but they have a degrading effect upon the tenants who occupy them. When people live in buildings that are not repaired or properly maintained, there is no incentive on their part to care for them, or to maintain a decent standard of living within them, nor does this inculcate in them respect for property. The tenants from such houses frequently encounter trouble when they go to occupy property that is properly maintained. Only those who have attempted to be mediators between tenants and property owners can realize how serious is the disposition on the part of a tenant to treat carelessly or destructively the property that he occupies. Recently, on the orders of a city health department, a property owner installed sanitary plumbing through a large tenement at an expense of several hundred



dollars and in less than a month's time, he invited the inspector to survey the stopped toilets, the broken water faucets, the sinks with missing drain pipes, etc. For ten years, ever since they had been in the country, the tenants had lived in miserable places with no water supply in the house and with vault closets in the yard. This landlord is paying the price of neglect on the part of other landlords, but naturally the pleasure that he might have taken by initiating these foreign peasants into the mysteries of modern sanitation, was somewhat counteracted by the size of his plumbing bill. Too much emphasis cannot be put upon the influence that the old house has upon the occupant's conception of property. Living in a house that is a source of manifold ills and discomforts to him, and a source of income without expenditure or care to the owner, creates a spirit of resentfulness that expends itself in a desire to mistrust property owners, and disregard property rights, and too often this red flame of resentment kindles a spirit of lawlessness and anarchy that is a menace to the community. Such tenants come to hold all property and all law in disrepute, and so the very real problem of the tenants' use of property and regard of sanitary regulations comes to be, and so the property owner who would prefer to give his tenants fair treatment becomes discouraged and skeptical.

The old house is the old bugaboo that all city and state legislators have paid abject homage to for years. Fair-minded real estate dealers and city planners are nailed to this cross of vested rights, and on either side of them hundreds of innocent victims are nailed to crosses bearing the same inscription. We draft new building codes, we expend hundreds of thousands of dollars to inspect new tenements to see that not in the slightest detail do they violate these codes, but what do we do about the old houses? We pass very colorless laws that demand that they be kept in a reasonable repair and that a reasonable amount of improvements be made. Let me give you an example of what is not a reasonable improvement. One city's law requires one toilet for every two families in all existing tenements, and if these toilets cannot be placed in the house, it allows the yard fixture—a fixture that has ten years ago been legislated out of existence for new buildings. A property owner who had five families using one toilet in a hall states, that there was no place for another toilet. He had built upon his entire lot, so that there was no place in the yard, and so he was told by the tenement house

department that he must use some of the space that is now used for living rooms, for toilet rooms. He took the case to court and the court agreed that the department was unreasonable to expect him to decrease the number of rooms of his apartments for which he could not receive rent for the installation of necessary plumbing. With this legal decision, we are apparently safe in assuming that the owners of the old houses comply with the requirements only when it does not inconvenience them to do so. A city official once sent an owner of property to the head of the tenement department with this note written on the order issued by that department: "Mr. — is my good friend, and is willing to comply with any reasonable orders, but he will not spend any money on this old house." An admirable definition of what is reasonable when dealing with the old house.

Most experts agree that the housing problem will never be solved by philanthropists building model houses or renting them to tenants at a price that does not yield a fair return on the money invested. They are claiming that tenants do not want and must not be the recipients of such philanthropy. Why then, should the owner of the old house be given such marked consideration over the owner of the new house? Is not he the recipient of legal discrimination that should be far more humiliating? The old house has already paid for itself many times over. The new house has its earnings all to make. In a word, if we recognize that certain sanitary regulations are just and necessary for the new buildings, why should they not be just and necessary for the old buildings? Unequal standards, whether in the world of ethics or materials, have only worked for injustice and discontent. If the old house is so bad that it cannot be repaired or remodeled to come to a legal standard, it should, like an outgrown garment, be cast aside and not kept up for sentiment's sake. Our American cities today are cluttered with hideous, insanitary houses, with sheds and stables that depreciate property values all about them, and stand as eye sores to the community and as an eloquent tribute to the doctrine of vested rights. Single taxation would sweep away these places from our midst as vacuum cleaners would clean up the floor, but in its absence an equalizing of the requirements for old and new houses would not only remove the old, but would in return stimulate the building of new houses.

To summarize, the old house is a menace to the health, the

morals, the standard of living of tenants; it is a constant source of expense to the community; it fosters a spirit of misunderstanding between property owners and occupants; it paralyzes new building enterprises; it sets a false basis for rents that fair-minded owners cannot cope with; it fosters a lawless disregard for all property rights; it depreciates surrounding property; it defaces the city and stands in the way of the city's progress, and it is therefore a dishonest source of income. An individual who sinned so grievously against the community would be punished—why should we be so much more charitable to an individual's property? The old house, like the old sinner, should be dealt with less charitably than the new.